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I. Clinton Saves Last Dance for Arafat

By Tony Karon

It would be fitting if Yasser Arafat turned out to be the last foreign visitor to President Clinton's White House. After all, even before his scheduled talks with the President Tuesday, Chairman Arafat already holds the title of the administration's Most Frequent Visitor — President Clinton has held more *tete-a-tetes* with the Palestinian leader than any other world leader during his eight years in office. Sometimes the Palestinian leader was in the foreground, such as that sunny fall afternoon in 1993 when he and the late Yitzhak Rabin gave the young president his first, and perhaps most enduring foreign policy triumph when they shook hands under his paternal smile on the White House lawn. At other times, Arafat was a Zelig-like presence, such as when he happened to be seated opposite the President at the moment when the White House media corps first peppered Clinton with questions about Monica Lewinsky. But where Arafat's presence once signified foreign policy success, today it suggests quite the opposite.

As President Clinton scrambles frantically to produce an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal during his last three weeks in office, the protagonists appear to be a lot further away from peace than they were late in 1993. Five Palestinians reportedly died at the hands of Israeli security forces and 30 Israelis were injured in a terrorist car bombing on Monday, as violence escalated ahead of Arafat's departure. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak Tuesday cast doubt over Clinton's prospects, suggesting Arafat was not serious about making peace at this late stage. Indeed, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that Arafat may be going through the motions for diplomacy's sake, and enjoying one final fling at the White House in the knowledge that it may be years before he's invited back. It certainly involves a stretch of the imagination to imagine Arafat accepting guarantees made by a lame duck U.S. president, much less cut a deal with an Israeli leader who looks set to be swept out of office by his hawkish opponent when Israel goes to the polls a month from now.

Both Arafat and Barak under pressure at home

The purpose of the Palestinian leader's visit is to "clarify" President Clinton's framework proposals for a final peace agreement — reportedly that Israel agree to withdraw from all of Gaza and 95 percent of the West Bank, including most of East Jerusalem and the Islamic holy sites, and the Palestinians to drop claims for the right of return to Israel of some 4 million Palestinian refugees forbidden by Israeli law from returning to homes they or their ancestors fled in 1948 during Israel's war of independence. Under mounting domestic pressure, Barak has suggested he'd accept the deal with reservations but wouldn't sign over sovereignty over the Muslim sites. That issue alone, as Camp David showed, could be enough to scupper a deal. But after three months of a bitter *intifada* that has seen the Palestinian street increasingly willing to contradict Arafat, the Palestinian leader may now find himself unable to simply sign away the claims of the refugees, even if that had been his original intention. Right now, the followers of both Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister

Barak are simply not yet ready to conclude a workable peace, and that's something that can't be changed by the best efforts and intentions of soon to be ex-President Clinton.



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